

## **‘Hands of Stone’ bobs and weaves but can’t land a blow**

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun  
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**Rating: «« out of 4 stars**

**Running Time: 105 min.**

If you watched any boxing in the '70s and early '80s, you'll certainly be familiar with Roberto Durán. The Panamanian was an incredible pugilist who courted controversy and provoked strong reactions over his career. The new film *Hands of Stone* depicts his life story, from his youth in the slums to success (and more troubles) in the ring. However, unlike the real figure, this biopic feels generic and soft. The telling of this tale could have used a lot more fire and passion.

The story is narrated by famed American trainer Ray Arcel (Robert De Niro), who recounts meeting Roberto Durán (Edgár Ramírez), seeing his potential and agreeing to prepare the brash and angry fighter for the professional leagues. Along the way, Arcel has to handle Durán's temperamental personality and ready him for a title bout with Sugar Ray Leonard (Usher Raymond).

The cast is fine, and the boxing itself isn't bad. Usher is compelling as Sugar Ray, effortlessly recreating the athlete's swagger and showmanship. Durán's matches with Sugar Ray and the lead-up to them offer some of the film's best moments, even if the movie tries a little too hard to sell many of Durán's nasty and insulting remarks as a strategic tactic to upset his opponent. Perhaps there's some truth to this, but given how easily the character flies off the handle, it doesn't exactly ring true.

Unfortunately, there are many more threads throughout the movie than matches. It's actually a

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problem, as the story bounces around too much for its own good. There are some interesting scenes early on, depicting the U.S. occupation of Panama, as well as a later one in which Durán verbally lashes out at a soldier, exemplifying his distaste for their treatment of his people.

But just as soon as the movie brings up a compelling issue, it quickly moves on. Durán also has to deal with a profiteering manager (Rubén Blades). Additionally, the personal lives of Durán, Arcel and even Leonard are touched upon, although they don't offer much insight. Ellen Barkin gets in a couple of moments as Arcel's wife and confidant, but the other spouses are completely wasted. Felicidad Iglesias (Ana De Armas) isn't given much to do besides look appealing, get teary-eyed toward the climax, and deliver awkward dialogue like, "You have to fight!" The same is true for Juanita Leonard (Jurnee Smollett-Bell).

And as compelling as De Niro always is, the script forces him to deliver and repeat a lot of boxing analogies for life that soon become tiring. "It's all in the head," and his, "Brains over brawn," speeches get a little old after being revisited for the third or fourth time. Not only that, but there are other tangents that include Arcel's relationship with a child from a previous marriage and his uneasy dealings with the mob.

Believe it or not, there is still more. Between this, Durán also must address his daddy issues, as well as his struggles dealing with fame and fortune, and the unfortunate fate of a close childhood friend. The story wraps up several of these subplots with only a quick scene, never delving deep enough into any area for viewers to become invested in. It also doesn't help that the string-heavy score oversells some of these emotional moments and makes it all feel artificial.

During his boxing career, Roberto Durán was one of the most incredible, charismatic, and polarizing competitors to ever get into a ring. *Hands of Stone* never really knows what it should be focusing on and so it attempts to briefly cover just about everything. This odd narrative approach leads to some thin and surface-level examinations of its characters. The end result is a run-of-the-mill biopic that feels more like a TV-movie than a theatrical experience. It bobs and weaves, but never lands a blow.

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**For the Sun**